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ABSTRACT

This discussion paper examines the current state of practice of adult literacy education in Washington State as well as initiatives to improve program effectiveness in a number of areas, including staff quality and curriculum. The paper discusses staff and curriculum development being undertaken by the ABLE (Adult Basic and Literacy Educator's) Network, and quality assurance being provided through the Office of Adult Literacy for programs funded through that office (about half the providers and 80 percent of the literacy students statewide). The range of effective practices center around the following: measuring educational gains, program planning, curriculum and instruction, staff quality, adequacy of resources, recruitment, retention, and service coordination. Six options are presented as considerations for identifying and promoting effective practices: (1) validating and disseminating promising practices; (2) preserving diversity in order to support the learning needs of all learners; (3) assessing the impact of practices on the state-level structure; (4) assessing the impact of a practice on local programs; (5) determining resources that are available or necessary to implement the option; and (6) determining if the option can be implemented in a cost-effective manner. The Washington State Indicators of Program Quality are suggested as a framework for the multiple program features that affect program quality. They serve as a basis for policy recommendations to improve the state of the art in adult basic skills programs in the state. (KC)

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A Series of Policy Papers for the Adult Education Advisory Council

ReDirection: Options for Policy and Practice in Adult Literacy in Washington State

Effective Practices

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Shifting the emphasis of state literacy programs from an attitude of *loco parentis* to customer satisfaction will ensure that they keep pace with the rapidly changing needs of adult learners.

--Jack Brizius and Susan Foster in *A Governor's Guide to Literacy*. 1994

OVERVIEW

It has been only 24 years since Malcolm Knowles coined the term andragogy—the art and science of teaching adults—and the field of adult education is still emerging. The body of research and the resulting knowledge base about effective practices remains scattered and incomplete, particularly with regard to basic skills education. Emerging from research is an awareness of the complexities of literacy education and the lives of the adults who participate.

What is presently known about what works in basic skills programs is largely based on local and/or anecdotal findings. Recently, scholars and practitioners alike have urged the field to collect and disseminate this practitioner-based knowledge in a systematic way and to further investigate issues specific to adult basic education. One of the purposes for the creation of the National Institute for Literacy was the collection and dissemination of information about successful programs and strategies. Two other national projects are beginning to produce information about effective practices in adult literacy programs. The ongoing National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs is a major study and survey of Adult Education Act (AEA) funded programs which has collected information about learners, services, and impact. Likewise, the development of Program Quality Indicators mandated in each state by the National Literacy Act of 1991 represents an effort to determine whether adult basic education programs are effective.

The reauthorization of the AEA may be dependent on the ability of states to demonstrate the impact of literacy instruction on the lives of learners and on larger social issues. This outcomes-based orientation is a major shift for a system that has been largely input driven. National and state leadership is required to direct the field toward changes that will result in improved programming and instruction to meet the needs of learners and fulfill state and national goals.

This final discussion paper examines the current state of practice in Washington as well as initiatives to improve program effectiveness in a number of areas, including staff quality and curriculum. The Washington State Indicators of Program Quality are provided as a framework for the multiple program features that affect program quality. Four options are presented to describe ways of determining and disseminating effective practices. They serve as a basis for

policy recommendations to improve the state of the art in adult basic skills programs in Washington State.

THE STATE OF THE STATE

There have been no systematic attempts in Washington or most other states to identify, prioritize, support and adopt specific practices that are most effective in producing learning in adult education programs. The Model Program Quality Indicators reflect national research into standards set for program evaluation rather than into the effects of particular elements. Moreover, staff qualifications and access to staff development, adequacy of resources, leadership, and instructional practices vary greatly among local programs. State level staff and curriculum development and quality assurance is largely provided by the Office of Adult Literacy (OAL) through a contract with the Adult Basic and Literacy Educator's (ABLE) Network.

Staff and Curriculum Development

The ABLE Network coordinates staff and curriculum development activities at the state and regional levels and provides annual conferences for basic skills providers. Through the Professional Development Series (PDS), ABLE Network offers regional workshops on the adult learner, critical thinking, personal management, communicative language teaching, cooperative learning, and authentic assessment, with other modules in development.

The ABLE Network has been responsible for two major curriculum projects. The first was the Washington State Core Competencies for ABE reading, writing, and math; for ESL listening, speaking, reading, writing, and computation; and for GED test preparation. The competencies, which must be the primary outcomes for programs funded through OAL, identify fundamental enabling skills without reference to context. Programs and teachers can supply contexts and applications which are relevant to learners' goals. The second curriculum initiative undertaken by the ABLE Network is the *I❖CANS* Project which intended to integrate the Core Competencies with the JTPA competencies in a single curriculum, but has become a much broader system also incorporating the SCANS skills with innovative instructional and assessment strategies.

Local programs also develop curriculum and activities independently. Several formal programs including Seattle Central Community College and Tacoma Community House have produced formal ESL curricula which incorporate the Core Competencies. AEA Special Project funds, which are awarded on a competitive basis, provide a stimulus for curricular innovation at the local level that is then shared with other programs throughout the state. These funds have been used to create assessment tools and other projects for the Core Competencies and to support both large and small innovations for workplace literacy, homeless, family literacy and corrections programs, among others.

Quality Assurance

Each program funded through the Office of Adult Literacy is evaluated regularly by state staff and/or outside reviewers. Uniform data are also collected for each funding source by programs in all community and technical colleges, some correctional institutions, county jails, community-based organizations and literacy councils. This data represents about half of the providers and approximately 80% of the literacy students statewide. Information about evaluation and data for other programs is not available.

Supported by the Volunteer Tutor Coordination Program of the Office of Adult Literacy, the document *Elements of Quality* was produced to promote quality standards for management, students and volunteers, establishing standards for volunteer adult tutoring programs in the state.

The adoption of the Washington State Indicators of Program Quality for adult education programs will mean even more emphasis on quality assurance in the future. These indicators will be tied to specific measures and standards some of which will be used for accountability and some which will be used for program improvement. (See Appendix for the Indicators and **draft** measures for the first indicator.) The quality indicators have undergone an extensive statewide adoption process and will be the basis for program evaluation in the future.

RANGE OF EFFECTIVE PRACTICES

Information about what works in adult basic education programs is diffuse. There is presently no means of compiling and distributing current information to program staff and managers other than through reports and professional journals. The eight program quality indicators describe the totality of programmatic features that play a role in the effectiveness of literacy programs. They are listed here with information derived from a variety of sources about current and promising developments in the field. Many of these areas remain unexplored. The implications for policies to promote promising practices center on the current funding and organizational structure and the amount of resources allocated to literacy education.

Educational Gains

As defined in the Washington State Adult Education Indicators of Program Quality, educational gains are the demonstration of adequate and appropriate progress toward attainment of basic skills and competencies that support students' educational needs, a definition that directly links outcomes to participation. However, stakeholders often have different expectations of adult basic skills programs and use a different yardstick to measure program effectiveness—employment and self-sufficiency. (The discussion paper, *Goals and Outcomes*, addressed this issue in detail by raising questions about what student outcomes can and should be expected from adult literacy programs.)

The issue of measuring educational gains is divisive because of the limitations of traditional standardized testing procedures, the differing testing and assessment requirements of funding sources, and the difficulties of accurate and complete data collection. Alternative assessment methods are gaining acceptance and show promise as a means of capturing the full range of the learning experience that cannot be represented in a single score. However, developing these promising assessment practices into effective practices requires a commitment of resources, technical assistance and training. It also requires common understandings and expectations of literacy education among all literacy stakeholders.

Program Planning

Ideally, programs have short and long-range plans which are developed with wide participation from community and staff. The Adult Education Act in fact promotes this kind of planning by requiring that programs have advisory councils with representation from business, labor, and other agencies to reflect community needs and resources. Programs, especially those operated by community-based organizations, are increasingly likely to include students in planning processes. However, program planning often suffers due to several factors: unstable funding, the marginalization and isolation of literacy, part-time staff, and inadequate facilities and materials.

Curriculum and Instruction

Curriculum (what is taught) and instruction (how it is taught) are the major elements of any education or training program and yet have received the least attention from research in adult basic education.

Increasingly, theorists and program planners are concluding that the strength of literacy programs has been hampered by their one-size-fits-all design and are advocating instruction set in specific contexts, e.g. personal management, workplace, or community. If a program intends to prepare students for the workforce, then teaching skills using workforce materials rather than generic texts is more effective.

Learner-centered instruction, which focuses on the real and explicit strengths and goals of adult learners, has generated interest among practitioners in the field. It bears promise of improving success rates but challenges traditional notions about who controls the curriculum. Traditionally, what is taught has been decided by funders and programs (for example the Washington State Core Competencies): In contrast, a learner-centered curriculum is determined by the students. Washington State has been a leader in developing negotiated curricula, which incorporate learner, program and funder needs and interests.

Individualized instruction is the predominant model for programs serving native English speakers because of the varied life situations, abilities and learning styles of students. In English as a Second Language, large and small group instruction is the norm. Research into the efficacy of cooperative learning and the apparent need of adult learners for both social support and social skills strongly support incorporating more interactive strategies.

This group-oriented methodology also has the potential to incorporate critical thinking, problem solving, group effectiveness, and influence. These are four of seven areas included in the new or advanced basic skills which SCANS and the American Society for Training and Development (ASTD) have identified as the skills employers want. The other areas are leadership, personal management, and learning to learn. Inclusion of all of these skills is currently a major issue in the field because teachers already feel overwhelmed by the task of teaching traditional basic skills, and because these new skills are difficult to incorporate and measure. Innovative curricular and instructional practices are often compromised by the limited time for planning and staff development available to a part-time corps of teachers and volunteers. In addition, the parameters set by funders often limit the extent to which programs are free to adopt new strategies that hold the potential to improve overall program effectiveness. For example, a program may be required to remain open-entry even though this policy interferes with establishing group instruction.

Computer-assisted instruction (CAI) has received considerable attention as a tool for improving learning gains and familiarizing literacy students with advanced technologies. The benefits of computer-assisted instruction are lessened by the weaknesses of available software and an inability to adapt content to the broader curriculum and students' interests and goals. CAI also fails to address students' needs for more effective interpersonal and communication skills. Moreoever, the use of computer systems requires a significant investment in equipment and training that most programs cannot afford.

Staff Quality

Staff quality includes two elements: teacher qualifications and staff development. Most teachers have bachelors degrees, but outside of ESL there are few university-level preparation programs specifically targeted to adult literacy. Also, there are no agreed-upon qualifications and competencies for adult basic education instructors. Unlike the public school system, adult basic education has no formal mechanism for teacher preparation or requirement for ongoing staff development and there is rarely compensation for part-time instructors. The available staff development opportunities for basic skills instructors are generally isolated workshops or conferences away from the program site, and volunteer tutors often receive only 10 or 12 hours of initial training.

A new approach called inquiry-based staff development allows teachers to develop and investigate their own research interests in order to improve teaching and program organization. Other projects attempting to provide teachers with skills and tools to critically examine their own practices have been initiated in several states. But significant financial and administrative support is required to remove the barriers to staff development in order to improve the level of professionalism in the field.

Adequacy of Resources

The National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs and other research indicates that programs should have sufficient resources to provide:

- Instruction intense enough (hours per week) to promote learning and retention
- Supportive services, such as child care, counseling, and transportation
- Smaller class sizes especially for ABE (as opposed to ESL or GED) students
- An appropriate ratio of full and part-time staff
- A mix of classroom and lab settings.

Obtaining and maintaining funding requires significant effort and coordination. Local programs must patch together funding from multiple sources to support even minimal programs. Often the funds which are available are narrowly targeted to specific groups and few resources are available for use in program development, research, and training. The time it takes to locate, apply for, and complete reporting requirements for such a patchwork of funding limits programs' capacity to focus on program quality and innovation. Moreover, the uncertainty of the grants and the diversity of their purposes makes efficient or effective planning and staffing difficult at best.

Recruitment

Adult literacy learners are diverse, and therefore the means used to recruit them must also be diverse. Marketing strategies to target specific groups of learners have been recommended by researchers particularly for the potentially hard-to-reach participants. But to a large extent, the high demand for programs and long waiting lists have limited the amount of experience programs have in recruiting students who could benefit from the program but are either unaware of its availability or hesitant to participate. The instructors and staff operating the program tend to be the primary determiners of the level of participation and the nature of

participants in the program. An increase in recruitment may need to occur depending on the target population determined by the state to be the service priority.

Retention

Retention is one of the most visible and critical issues because of the assumed correlation between high retention and high achievement. However, some researchers question the primacy of retention as an indicator of success for students with short-term goals or students with high entry skills. Nevertheless, recent reports from state and local sources revealing low retention rates are causing the field to examine the factors that affect persistence. The National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs showed a high correlation between retention and program factors, rather than between retention and learner characteristics. "The strongest predictors across all three components (ABE, ESL, and ASE) are the use of support services, receipt of instruction during the day as opposed to evening, and the learning environment."[1] Learning environment includes factors such as class size, curricular emphasis, mode of instruction, presence of full time staff, and coordination with other agencies providing services. These are factors over which local programs have some control. Improving student retention depends on increased attention to the particular needs of different groups of students and commitment of resources to providing comprehensive services to adult learners.

Service Coordination

The importance of collaboration in managing resources and delivering effective programs is stressed at national, state, and local levels. This topic has been addressed at length in the third discussion paper, *Roles for Providers*. Coalitions in name only are insufficient to instill the degree of collaboration and coordination for effective linkages. A carefully considered commitment of time and resources and an infrastructure for the basic skills delivery system based on common goals and networks of service is critical to impacting student outcomes.

POLICY OPTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Some Considerations for Identifying and Promoting Effective Practices

1. Does the option provide for identification, validation and dissemination of promising practices?

2. Does the option preserve the diversity of program practices in order to support the learning needs of all learners?

3. What impact will the option have on state level structure?

4. What is the impact on local programs?

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[1]Development Associates, Inc. (1994). Patterns and Predictors of Client Attendance. *National Evaluation of Adult Education Programs*: Washington D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, p. 44.

5. What resources are available or necessary to implement the option?

6. Can the option be implemented in a cost-effective manner?

The options below focus on ways to promote and support effective practices rather than on recommending specific ones. Because there is such a limited knowledge base of what works in adult basic education, any policy initiative requires a plan for promoting effective practices that are determined through the current experiences of local programs and national models. All of the options present ways of determining, validating and sharing effective practices. What is required is an infrastructure for continuously learning about what works in basic skills instruction because that knowledge is constantly evolving with new methods and ideas.

State-Validated Practices

New York State has developed a model for accumulating knowledge about "programs that work" and disseminating that knowledge state wide. In the first stage, new practices that prove to be effective are generated locally; these are evaluated by the Department of Education and placed into one of two categories: promising practices or validated programs. All promising practices and validated programs are shared through demonstration. Providers that choose to replicate them are provided with technical assistance and support. The critical characteristics of this model are the local development and nomination of practices, validation through a rigorous evaluation process by the state education department, and the dissemination through demonstration and ongoing technical assistance. A Washington State model could put validation of effective practices in the hands of a group that includes teachers and administrators, researchers, and Office of Adult Literacy personnel. Special Project funds could be used to validate and disseminate the new practices.

Consideration	Implication
Promotes Valid Practices	The process would be built around the promotion of effective practice through identifying, validating and sharing best practices at the state level.
Diversity	Practices would be locally generated and therefore reflect the diversity of local programs.
State Structure	Procedures would have to be developed and a committee appointed and trained to carry out the validation process. Support for replication would most likely be the responsibility of the ABLE Network.
Local Impact	Small programs without full-time faculty would find it difficult to document and evaluate practices in order to apply for validation.
Resources	If Special Project funds, which are currently awarded to local programs for project development, are allocated instead for the validation process, the resources available for developing new practices would be seriously diminished.
Cost Effectiveness	Additional costs for validation and replication procedures would be offset by the quality control and expansion of the knowledge base of successful practice.

Locally Adopted Practices

Local programs could adopt an ongoing process of program improvement using the Program Quality Indicators. This process would include development, examination and implementation of specific practices. Program staff would study current practices using achievement, retention and other data to identify practices that are effective and those that need to be improved or replaced. New or improved practices would be developed and then pilot tested before program-wide implementation. A program-specific model would allow effective practices to be defined by local program needs and conditions. This process could also be implemented by pairs or groups of local programs, thus applying a peer coaching model to program improvement.

Consideration	Implication
Promotes Valid Practices	There is no provision for external validation of effective practices. Local programs, and therefore local staff, would determine how practices are to be evaluated.
Diversity	Practices would be locally generated, evaluated and accepted. Therefore, they would reflect the diversity of local programs.
State Structure	Minimal changes would be required at the state level to encourage and assist programs.
Local Impact	The impact of ongoing improvement on programs would be significant. It would also require considerable staff time and commitment, which is not always feasible with the preponderance of part-time staff and minimal funds for meetings and staff development.
Resources	Adjustment in the allotment of Special Project funds to support local program improvement would decrease the amount of Special Project funds available for statewide projects. Training would need to be provided on-site to local staff engaged in identifying and documenting best practices.
Cost-Effectiveness	Since all of the costs, except for initial training provided by the ABLE Network, would be absorbed by the local programs, implementation of this option would require more resources for local staff and program development.

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Instructional Leadership

Another way to promote effective practices locally is to ensure that each program has full-time instructional leadership in ABE/GED and ESL. In this model, funders would require full-time teaching positions in each program and require that half of the full-time teachers' time be dedicated to instructional leadership (providing training, modeling, peer coaching, etc.) in

order to improve instructional practices. The role of the ABLE Network would shift to reduce statewide training and increase dissemination and supportive technical assistance activities.

Consideration	Implication
Promotes Valid Practices	There is no provision for external validation of effective practices. Practices are developed and shared at the local level.
Diversity	Since practices are developed and adapted by local programs, the system would remain diverse.
State Structure	In order to ensure adequate funding to support this option, funders would have to coordinate with each other and with local providers.
Resources	The allocation of funding to local programs would be significantly changed in order to provide each program with funding for one or two full time positions.
Cost Effectiveness	The potential impact of a full-time instructional leader is significant and would justify the cost of implementation.

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State Leadership

The Office of Adult Literacy currently disseminates information about effective practices through various staff development activities and periodic program review. A more active and focused role in promoting effective practices would require prioritizing program improvement needs, researching effective practices nationwide, disseminating information, and rewarding programs based on the use of effective practices. State activities in specifically identified areas of need, for example retention issues, would focus identification, examination and promotion of effective practices statewide. Technical assistance for adopting the state-approved practices would by tailored to local programs by the ABLE Network.

Consideration	Implication
Promotes Valid Practices	Effective practices are based on national and state research.
Diversity	Practices identified at the state level would not necessarily be relevant or applicable to all local programs.
State Structure	The focus of state-level staff would be shifted to direct program improvement through research and on-site promotion of effective practices, but the actual structure would not necessarily change.
Resources	If new money could not be found, some Special Projects money which is usually competitively awarded to local programs, would remain at the state level and be used for the research, development and promotion of effective practices.
Cost-Effectiveness	The centralization of the development and validation of effective practices would make this a cost-effective option. By addressing and

focusing on a few priority areas, it would speed state-wide adoption of practices. However, additional costs for promotion and technical assistance would be incurred.

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CONCLUSION

At a time when adult basic education is receiving widespread attention and an increased demand for accountability, it is crucial that knowledge and experience about what practices are most effective be collected and shared. The options presented propose ways to share the best programs, strategies and practices in order to improve services to learners and the overall effectiveness of adult basic education among all service providers in Washington.

- Innovation, cooperation and replication are key components of any plan to improve the overall delivery of services to adults.
- The development of models of effective practices can serve to strengthen a pluralistic delivery system without homogenizing it.
- No single innovation will immediately and significantly change all outcomes.
- Programs cannot be expected to be optimally effective until they have stable funding and consistent regulatory requirements.[2]
- Practices based on faulty assumptions—about the nature of learners and their goals, outcomes for literacy instruction, and the definition of learning and literacy—cannot be effective.

The redirection of adult literacy in Washington through the development of clear state goals and decisions about priorities for service and the roles of providers will all affect students, but the services and instruction provided will have the most direct impact on their lives. While research and analysis can offer insight into what strategies are most effective, consideration must be given to the roles students can play in adult basic education programs. An orientation rooted in knowledge about the adult learner rejects a deficit model which is oriented to remedying weaknesses. It looks to learner strengths and listens to learner voices in designing a system that can meaningfully and profoundly change the lives of the participants and the larger community.

[2]Jack Brizius and Susan Foster. *A Governor's Guide to Literacy: a Primary for State Literacy Policy makers.* Washington, D.C.: National Governors' Association, 1994. p. 25.